



# U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

## Saudi Arabia

### International Religious Freedom Report 2004

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The country is ruled by a monarchy with a legal system based on Islamic law (Shari'a). The Government does not provide legal protection for freedom of religion, and such protection does not exist in practice. Islam is the official religion, and the law requires that all citizens be Muslims. The Government prohibits the public practice of non-Muslim religions. The Government recognizes the right of non-Muslims to worship in private; however, it does not always respect this right in practice and does not define this right in law.

There generally was no change in the status of religious freedom during the period covered by this report, although the Government continued a campaign to foster greater moderation and tolerance of religious diversity. The Government enforces a strictly conservative version of Sunni Islam. Muslims who do not adhere to the officially sanctioned Salafi (commonly called "Wahhabi") tradition can face severe repercussions at the hands of the Mutawwa'in (religious police). The Government continued to detain Shi'a leaders. Members of the Shi'a minority continued to face political and economic discrimination, including limited employment opportunities, little representation in official institutions, and restrictions on the practice of their faith and on the building of mosques and community centers. The Government has stated publicly that its policy is to allow non-Muslims to worship privately; however, this policy is not consistently enforced, resulting in the violation of some non-Muslims' freedom of worship and causing other non-Muslims to worship in fear of harassment and in such a manner as to avoid discovery.

During the period covered by this report, senior government officials made some efforts to improve the climate of tolerance toward other religions and within Islam. The Government convened a second and third session of the "National Dialogue" meeting that included members of different Muslim traditions and both men and women and issued statements condemning incitements to violence. The session released a set of recommendations that called for educational reform and development of tolerance and moderation in education. The Government also took measures to remove what it deemed to be disparaging references to other religious traditions from the educational curriculum. In addition, increased press freedom permitted journalists to criticize publicly abuses by the religious police. However, religious discrimination and sectarian tension in society continued during the period covered by this report, including denunciations of non-Muslim religions from government-sanctioned pulpits.

In January and February, the country hosted approximately 2 million Muslim pilgrims from around the world and all branches of Islam for the annual hajj pilgrimage. The majority of citizens support a state based on Islamic law, and many oppose public non-Muslim worship, although there continued to exist differing views regarding how this should be realized in practice. There continued to be societal discrimination against members of the Shi'a minority.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Senior administration officials continued to raise U.S. concerns with the Government. In September 2004, the Secretary of State designated Saudi Arabia as a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 1,225,000 square miles, and its population is approximately 24 million, with an estimated foreign population of 6 to 7 million. The foreign population includes approximately 1.4 million Indians, 1 million Bangladeshis, nearly 900,000 Pakistanis, 800,000 Filipinos, 750,000 Egyptians, 250,000 Palestinians, 150,000 Lebanese, 130,000 Sri Lankans, 40,000 Eritreans, and 30,000 Americans. Comprehensive statistics for the religious denominations of foreigners are not available; however, they include Muslims from the various branches and schools of Islam, Christians, and Hindus. Approximately 90 percent of the Filipino community is Christian. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops estimates there are considerably more than 500,000 Catholics in the country and perhaps as many as 1 million.

The majority of citizens are Sunni Muslims who predominantly adhere to the strict interpretation of Islam taught by the Salafi School.

Approximately 2 million citizens are Shi'a Muslims, the vast majority of whom live in the Eastern Province, where they constitute between 40 and 50 percent of the Province's citizen population.

There is no information regarding foreign missionaries in the country. Proselytization by non-Sunni Muslims is not permitted, and the promotion of non-Salafi Sunni Islam is restricted.

## **Section II. Status of Religious Freedom**

### *Legal/Policy Framework*

Freedom of religion does not exist. It is not recognized or protected under the country's laws, and basic religious freedoms are denied to all but those who adhere to the state-sanctioned version of Sunni Islam. Citizens are denied the freedom to choose or change their religion, and noncitizens practice their beliefs under severe restrictions. Islam is the official religion, and all citizens must be Muslims. The Government limits the practice of all but the officially sanctioned version of Islam and prohibits the public practice of other religions. During the period covered by this report, the Government publicly restated its policy that non-Muslims are free to practice their religions at home and in private. While the Government does not always respect this right in practice, many non-Muslims engage in private worship without harassment. As custodian of Islam's two holiest sites in Mecca and Medina, the Government considers its legitimacy to rest largely on its interpretation and enforcement of Shari'a. Consequently, the Government has declared the Koran and the Sunna (tradition) of Muhammad to be the country's Constitution. The Government follows the rigorously conservative and strict interpretation of the Salafi (often referred to as "Wahhabi") school of the Sunni branch of Islam and discriminates against other branches of Islam. Neither the Government nor society in general accepts the concept of separation of religion and state.

The country is governed according to the Basic Law, which sets out the system of government, rights of residents and citizens, and powers and duties of the Government. The judiciary bases its judgments largely on Shari'a, a legal system derived from the Koran and the Sunna. The Government permits Shi'a Muslims to use their own legal tradition to adjudicate cases limited to family law, inheritance, and endowment management. However, there are only two such judges, one in Qatif and one in al Hasa, which is insufficient to serve the sizable Shi'a populations of those areas and the rest of the country.

The 'Eid al-Fitr and 'Eid al-Adha religious holidays are recognized as the only national holidays. During the period covered by this report, the Government again permitted the observance of the Shi'a holiday of Ashura in the eastern city of Qatif and in the southern province of Najran. Small-scale, public observances of Ashura also occurred in Al-Hasa and Saihat.

Hindus are considered polytheists by Islamic law, which is used as a justification for greater discrimination in calculating accidental death or injury compensation. According to the country's "Hanbali" interpretation of Shari'a, once fault is determined by a court, a Muslim male receives 100 percent of the amount of compensation determined, a male Jew or Christian receives 50 percent, and all others (including Hindus and Sikhs) receive 1/16 of the amount a male Muslim receives.

### *Restrictions on Religious Freedom*

Tolerated Islamic practice generally is limited to a school of the Sunni branch of Islam as interpreted by Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab, an 18th century Arab religious leader. (This branch of Islam is often referred to as "Wahhabi," a term that many adherents to this tradition do not use. The teachings of Abd Al-Wahhab are more often referred to by adherents as "Salafi" or "Muwahiddun," that is, following the forefathers of Islam, or unifiers of Islamic practice.) Practices contrary to this interpretation, such as celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday and visits to the tombs of renowned Muslims, are forbidden. The Government prohibits the spreading of Islamic teachings that do not conform to the officially accepted interpretation of Islam. During the period covered by this report, there was an increasing degree of public discussion of the conservative religious traditions. Particularly after the May 2003 terror attacks in Riyadh, some citizen writers began to criticize abuses committed by the religious police (the Committee to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice, commonly called the "Mutawwa'in"). However, discussion of religious issues is severely constrained, and the editors and writers of major local daily newspapers have been temporarily or permanently banned for the publication of articles and cartoons critical of the religious establishment.

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs supervises and finances the construction and maintenance of almost all mosques, although approximately 30 percent of all mosques are built and endowed by private persons for charity or at private

residences. However, all mosques fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. The Ministry pays the salaries of imams (prayer leaders) and others who work in the mosques. The Committee to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice is a governmental entity, whose chairman has ministerial status. A separate government committee defines the qualifications of imams.

Since the May and November 2003 terrorist attacks in Riyadh, the Government has taken public measures to control religious extremism. It continued to fire imams for immoderate preaching, and it began retraining and providing "guidance" for preachers. The Government also held training courses for Mutawwa'in in interpersonal relations.

The Government bars foreign imams from leading worship during the most heavily attended prayer times, and it prohibits them from delivering sermons during Friday congregational prayers. The Government states that its actions are part of its "Saudization" plan to replace foreign workers with citizens. Writers and other individuals who publicly criticized this interpretation, including both those who advocated a stricter interpretation and those who favored a more moderate interpretation than the Government's, risked sanctions. Several journalists who wrote critically about the religious leadership or who questioned theological dogma temporarily were banned from writing or traveling abroad.

Under Shari'a, conversion by a Muslim to another religion is considered apostasy, a crime punishable by death if the accused does not recant. There were no executions for apostasy during the period covered by this report, and there have been no reports of such executions for several years. During the period covered by this report, a schoolteacher was tried for apostasy, and eventually convicted in March of blasphemy; the person was given a prison sentence of 3 years and 300 lashes. The trial received substantial press coverage.

The Government prohibits public non-Muslim religious activities. Non-Muslim worshippers risk arrest, imprisonment, lashing, deportation, and sometimes torture for engaging in religious activity that attracts official attention. The Government has stated publicly, including before the U.N. Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, that its policy is to allow non-Muslim foreigners to worship privately. However, the Government does not provide explicit guidelines--such as the number of persons permitted to attend and acceptable locations--for determining what constitutes private worship, which makes distinctions between public and private worship unclear. This lack of clarity and instances of inconsistent enforcement led many non-Muslims to worship in fear of harassment and in such a way as to avoid discovery. The Government usually deported those detained for visible non-Muslim worship after sometimes lengthy periods of arrest during investigation. In some cases, they also were sentenced to receive lashes prior to deportation.

The Government officially does not permit non-Muslim clergy to enter the country to conduct religious services, although some come under other auspices, and the Government generally has allowed their performance of discreet religious functions. Such restrictions make it very difficult for most non-Muslims to maintain contact with clergymen and attend services. Catholics and Orthodox Christians, who require a priest on a regular basis to receive the sacraments required by their faith, particularly are affected.

Proselytizing by non-Muslims, including the distribution of non-Muslim religious materials such as Bibles, is illegal. Proselytizing by non-Sunni Muslims also is not permitted, and the promotion of non-Salafi Sunni Islam is restricted. Muslims or non-Muslims wearing religious symbols of any kind in public risk confrontation with the Mutawwa'in. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs sponsors approximately 50 so-called "Call and Guidance" centers employing approximately 500 persons to convert foreigners to Islam. Some non-Muslim foreigners convert to Islam during their stay in the country. The press often carries articles about such conversions, including testimonials.

The Government requires noncitizens to carry Iqamas, or legal resident identity cards, which contain a religious designation for "Muslim" or "non-Muslim." There have been reports that individual Mutawwa'in have pressured sponsors not to renew Iqamas, which had been issued for employment, of individuals for religious reasons.

Members of the Shi'a minority are the subjects of officially sanctioned political and economic discrimination. During the period covered by this report, authorities continued to permit a greater degree of freedom to Shi'ites in the Eastern Province city of Qatif than in the past, overlooking religious practices and gatherings that were previously prevented. There were no reports of meeting places being closed in Qatif. However, in other areas with large Shi'a populations, such as al-Hasa and Dammam, there continued to be restrictions on Shi'a religious practices. In February and March, observances of Ashura took place in Qatif, although the police presence outside of Qatif was much larger than in the past. However, there were no reports of police interference with Ashura celebrations. In Qatif's city center, large groups of Shi'a gathered to hear Shi'a clerics speak and to purchase books and other religious paraphernalia. Many Shi'a travel to Qatif or Bahrain to participate in Ashura celebrations because of restrictions on public observances in other parts of the country. The Government continued sporadically to enforce other restrictions on the Shi'a community, such as banning Shi'a books and excluding Shi'a perspectives from the extensive religious media and broadcast programming.

Shi'a have declined government offers to build state-supported mosques because they fear the Government would prohibit the incorporation and display of Shi'a motifs in any such mosques. In the past, Shi'a have been permitted to build new Hussainiyas (gathering places) in Qatif and Ahsa, but the Government has closed Shi'a mosques built without government permission.

Members of the Shi'a minority are discriminated against in government employment, especially in national security-related positions, such as in the military or Ministry of Interior. While there are some Shi'a who occupy high-level positions in government-owned companies and government agencies, many Shi'a believe that openly identifying oneself as Shi'a will have a negative impact on career advancement. There is an absence of Shi'a representatives in government, both local and national. While there is no formal policy concerning the hiring and promotion of Shi'a, anecdotal evidence suggests that in some companies -- including companies in the oil and petrochemical industries-- Shi'a are passed over for less-qualified Sunni compatriots.

The Government also discriminates against Shi'a in higher education through unofficial restrictions on the number of Shi'a admitted to universities. There are no Shi'a principals in the approximately 300 female schools in the Eastern Province. While government officials state that textbook language with prejudicial, anti-Shi'a statements has been removed, some teachers have not been retrained and continue to use anti-Shi'a rhetoric. Some cases have resulted in punitive measures being taken against Shi'a parents who have complained. There are no Shi'a cabinet ministers, and there are only 2 Shi'a in the 120-member Majlis al-Shura (consultative council). There are no Shi'a members of the country's highest religious authority, the Council of Senior Islamic Scholars (Ulema).

Since 2001, the Government has allowed Shi'a citizens to travel freely to Iran for religious pilgrimages. Travel to Iraq is more difficult due to the security situation. However, many Shi'a from the Eastern Province traveled to Karbala during Ashura.

Under the provisions of Shari'a law as practiced in the country, judges may discount the testimony of nonpracticing Muslims or of individuals who do not adhere to the official interpretation of Islam. Legal sources report that testimony by Shi'a is often ignored in courts of law or is deemed to have less weight than testimony by Sunnis.

Customs officials routinely open mail and shipments to search for contraband, including Sunni printed material deemed incompatible with the Salafi tradition of Islam, Shi'a religious materials, and non-Muslim materials, such as Bibles and religious videotapes. Such materials are subject to confiscation, although rules appear to be applied arbitrarily.

Sunni Islamic religious education is mandatory in public schools at all levels. Regardless of which Islamic tradition their families adhere to, all public school children receive religious instruction that conforms to the Salafi tradition of Islam. Non-Muslim students in private schools are not required to study Islam. Private religious schools are not permitted for non-Muslims or for Muslims adhering to non-Salafi traditions of Islam. Shi'a are banned from teaching religion in schools.

Public debate over reform in the country continued during the period covered by this report. In August 2003, Crown Prince Abdullah announced the establishment of the King Abd al-Aziz Center for National Dialogue. In December 2003, the Second Session of the "National Dialogue" was held in Mecca. The session issued recommendations that called for educational reform and studies to examine religious extremism in the country, and it included representatives from different Muslim religious traditions. Following the second session in January, a group of religious conservatives published a petition to the Crown Prince warning against diminishing the role of religion in school curriculums. Shi'a were represented at both sessions. Nevertheless, despite positive statements, there has been little tangible improvement in the status of those who do not adhere to the state-sanctioned version of Islam or who belong to a minority religious group.

During the period covered by this report, the Government approved the formation of the National Human Rights Association (NHRA). The NHRA, the country's first human rights organization, is chaired by a member of the Majlis al-Shura (Consultative Council) and has stated that one of its tasks is to ensure that the Government complies with international human rights agreements to which it is a signatory, as well as with human rights standards under Islam.

#### *Abuses of Freedom of Religion*

During the period covered by this report, the Government continued to commit abuses of religious freedom. However, reports of abuses often are difficult or impossible to corroborate. Fear and consequent secrecy surrounding any non-Muslim religious activity contribute to reluctance to disclose any information that might harm persons under government investigation. Moreover, information regarding government practices is incomplete because judicial proceedings generally are closed to the public, although the 2002 Criminal Procedural Law allows some court



proceedings to be open to the public.

While there was an improvement in press freedom during the period covered by this report, open discussion of religious issues remained constrained. The press reported on debates in the Majlis al-Shura that focused on whether individuals must be Muslim to attain citizenship and included opinions on both sides of the issue. In November 2003, Mansur al-Noqaidan, a writer for Al-Riyadh, an Arabic-language paper, published an editorial in the New York Times criticizing the Government's response to religious extremism. Al-Noqaidan was sentenced to lashes for writing articles critical of the religious establishment in the press. This sentence had not been carried out by the end of the period covered by this report. There was also a report that a university professor was banned from teaching for criticizing the Government's discriminatory policies against Shi'a. The professor also was banned from traveling abroad.

There were no reported arrests of Shi'a religious leaders for religious violations. In September 2003, the press reported a raid in the Al Jouf region, where 16 Sufis were arrested for possession and distribution of books, videos, and brochures promoting Sufism. According to various reports, a number of Shi'a remained in detention during the period covered by this report, and there were reports of religious prisoners who were subjected to torture. Sheikh Ali bin Ali al-Ghanim was released from prison in 2002 after 20 months' imprisonment. During the period covered by this report, there were no new reports of young Shi'a being detained for extended periods of time. In the past, in such cases charges were rarely filed, and family members were not notified where the young men were held.

The Government continued to detain and deport non-Muslims for religious reasons. In 2003, an Ethiopian Christian activist leader was deported after an employment dispute led to investigation of his religious activities.

In October 2003, two Egyptian Christians were arrested by Mutawwa'in and jailed for religious activities. They were both released in November 2003, and neither was deported. Two other Catholics were arrested in Riyadh in October 2003 by regular police and released the same day without charge.

In February, a resident Christian was deported after providing an Arabic Bible to a citizen. In April, there were credible reports that Mutawwa'in arrested Brian O'Connor, an Indian Christian, for religious reasons after a dispute with his employer. According to reports, the Mutawwa'in beat him on the day of the arrest. The reports also claim that the Mutawwa'in confiscated his personal property, in addition to two Bibles, compact disks, a personal computer, and religious materials in video format. The Indian was in custody in Al Ha'ir jail on alcohol charges at the end of the period covered by this report, but colleagues claim that the charges against him were false and based on planted evidence.

There also were reports of surveillance of Christian religious services by security personnel.

Magic is widely believed in and sometimes practiced; however, under Shari'a the practice of magic is regarded as the worst form of polytheism, an offense for which no repentance is accepted and which is punishable by death. There were an unknown number of detainees held in prison on the charge of "sorcery," including the practice of "black magic" or "witchcraft." There have been no reports of executions for several years. During the period covered by this report, the local press reported several cases of arrests of foreigners and citizens for practicing sorcery.

Mutawwa'in practices and incidents of abuse varied widely in different regions of the country. Reports of incidents were most numerous in the central Nejd region, which includes the capital Riyadh. In certain areas, both the Mutawwa'in and religious vigilantes acting on their own harassed, assaulted, battered, arrested, and detained citizens and foreigners. The Government requires the Mutawwa'in to follow established procedures and to offer instruction in a polite manner; however, Mutawwa'in did not always comply with the requirements. During the period covered by this report, the Government acknowledged inappropriate conduct by some Mutawwa'in but refused to provide information on the number of reported incidents or disciplinary actions. While senior officials have defended the role of the Mutawwa'in, in 2003 the committee announced plans for a training program for Mutawwa'in in interpersonal skills; however, the extent and effect of the program was not clear at the end of the period covered by this report. During this period, and particularly after the May 2003 terrorist bombings in Riyadh, reports of Mutawwa'in abuses declined considerably.

Mutawwa'in enforcement of strict standards of social behavior included closing commercial establishments during five daily prayer observances, insisting upon compliance with strict norms of public dress, and dispersing gatherings in public places. In October 2003, the Mutawwa'in reminded foreign workers to respect Ramadan, stating that if individuals were found ignoring the societal norms associated with Ramadan, they would be liable for punishment. Mutawwa'in reproached citizen and foreign women for failure to observe strict dress codes, and they detained men and women found together who were not married or closely related. In December 2003, the press reported that the Mutawwa'in warned shopkeepers in the Eastern Province not to sell New Year's or Christmas gifts or decorations. The warning also reminded employees not to allow their staff to celebrate either holiday openly. In February, the Grand Mufti restated a previously issued fatwa that declared Valentine's Day a "pagan Christian holiday" that could

not be celebrated publicly. The Mutawwa'in banned shopkeepers from selling Valentine's Day gifts and decorations and forbade vendors from selling roses 5 days prior to and following February 14.

The Mutawwa'in have the authority to detain persons for no more than 24 hours for violation of strict standards of proper dress and behavior; however, they sometimes exceeded this limit before delivering detainees to the police. Procedures require a police officer to accompany the Mutawwa'in at the time of arrest; Mutawwa'in generally complied with this requirement. According to reports, the Mutawwa'in also are no longer permitted to detain citizens for more than a few hours, may not conduct investigations, and may no longer allow unpaid volunteers to accompany official patrols.

During the period covered by this report, there were no reports of abuse cases involving Hindus. The Government regards members of the large Hindu community as polytheists, and non-Muslim, non-Western religious communities must exercise extreme caution when practicing their religion.

During the period covered by this report, there were frequent instances in which mosque preachers, whose salaries are paid by the Government, used violently anti-Jewish and anti-Christian language in their sermons. Although this language has declined in frequency since the May 2003 attacks, there continue to be instances in which Mosque speakers prayed for the death of Jews and Christians, including from the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina.

#### *Abuses by Terrorist Organizations*

During the period covered by this report, al-Qa'ida terrorists conducted a campaign of terrorist attacks in various locations in the country. In these attacks, they killed both Muslims and non-Muslims, citizens and expatriates, and members of the security forces. The terrorists justified these murders through an extreme religious ideology. In at least one incident, the May attack on a Western housing compound in al-Khobar, terrorists singled out non-Muslims for execution.

#### *Forced Religious Conversion*

Under the law, children of male citizens are considered Muslim, regardless of the country or the religious tradition in which they have been raised. The Government's application of this law discriminates against non-Muslim, noncitizen mothers and denies their children the freedom to choose their religion. There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States during the period covered by this report.

#### *Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom*

During the period covered by this report, senior government officials made some efforts to improve the climate of tolerance toward other religions and within Islam. The Government convened a second and third session of the "National Dialogue" meeting that included members of different Muslim traditions and both men and women. The sessions presented a set of written recommendations to the Government that called for educational reform and development of tolerance and moderation in education.

The Government also took limited measures to remove what it deemed to be disparaging references to other religious traditions from the educational curriculum. In addition, increased press freedom permitted journalists to publicly criticize abuses by the religious police.

During the period covered by this report, the Government approved the formation of the NHRA, the country's first independent human rights body, which is chaired by a member of the Majlis al-Shura.

Senior leaders, including the Crown Prince and the Grand Mufti, called for moderation. These efforts continued to intensify after the May and November 2003 terror attacks in Riyadh. **In August 2003, the highest religious authorities called on Muslims in the country to turn away from religious extremism and unjustified jihad.**

### **Section III. Societal Attitudes**

As a deeply conservative and devout Muslim society, there is intense pressure to conform to societal norms. During the period covered by this report, a citizen teacher was tried for apostasy. The case received substantial press coverage, but after testimony the court declined to convict him of apostasy and instead convicted him of blasphemy.

The conservative religious leadership also exerts pressure on the state to maintain its strict Islamic practices. To combat religious extremism, in May 2003 the Government announced the firing of several hundred prayer leaders and began to retrain them and other mosque employees.

Following the June 2003 session of the "National Intellectual Dialogue," participants representing different Muslim traditions in the country, including Sunni and Shi'ite leaders, issued a statement acknowledging that theological differences are "natural" and committing themselves to resolve differences through dialogue. The Government held a second session in Mecca in December 2003 that discussed educational reform, including the role of religion in school curriculums.

There is societal discrimination against members of the Shi'a minority. The majority of citizens support a state based on Islamic law and oppose public non-Muslim worship, although there are differing views as to how this should be realized in practice. The official title of the head of state is "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques," and the role of the King and the Government in upholding Islam within the country is regarded as a paramount function throughout the Muslim world.

Many non-Muslims who undertook religious observances privately and discreetly during the period covered by this report were not harassed. However, some non-Muslims claimed that informants paid by the Mutawwa'in infiltrated their private worship groups.

Relations between Muslim citizens and foreign Muslims are generally good. Each year the country welcomes approximately 2 million Muslim pilgrims from all over the world and of all branches of Islam, who visit the country to perform the hajj and umra.

In certain areas, religious vigilantes unaffiliated with the Government and acting on their own, harassed, assaulted, battered, arrested, and detained citizens and foreigners.

During the period covered by this report, the local press rarely printed articles or commentaries disparaging other religions; however, following the May attack in which terrorists killed six Westerners in Yanbu, the Crown Prince publicly stated that he believed Zionism was behind recent acts of terrorism.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. Government policy is to press the Government consistently to honor its public commitment to permit private religious worship by non-Muslims, eliminate discrimination against minorities, and promote tolerance toward non-Muslims.

During the period covered by this report, the U.S. Ambassador discussed U.S. concerns over the lack of religious freedom with a wide range of senior government and religious leaders. The Ambassador also raised specific cases of violations with senior officials, and U.S. Embassy officers met with Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) officials to deliver and discuss the U.S. Government's 2003 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom. Senior Embassy officers called on the Government to enforce its public commitment to allow private religious practice and to respect the rights of Muslims who do not follow the Salafi tradition of Islam. The U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom visited the country in October 2003 and met with senior government officials to raise religious freedom issues. In addition, Embassy officers met with MFA officials at various other times to discuss matters pertaining to religious freedom. In September 2004, the Secretary of State designated Saudi Arabia as a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

Released on September 15, 2004

[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](http://state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2004/35507pf.htm)